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C O N F I D E N T I A L PANAMA 000446

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/27/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KCRM](#) [KJUS](#) [MARR](#) [MASS](#) [MOPS](#) [PM](#)
SUBJECT: PANAMA: "MILITARIZATION" DEBATE RE-SURFACES

Classified By: POLCOUNS Brian R. Naranjo. Reasons: 1.4 (B) and (D).

Summary

1. (C) Panama's ever-smoldering "militarization" debate reignited over the past couple of weeks as Panamanian opinion shapers and leaders -- largely associated with the opposition, at least in opinion -- voiced their concerns that the GOP might be undertaking what they perceived as an ill-advised effort to rebuild Panama's military. These concerns emerged in the wake of a perceived convergence of developments:

- (a) President Martin Torrijos' recent "secretive" visit to Washington (May 5-7);
- (b) Reporting on SECDEF Gates' May 6 letter (reported in a defense trade journal and echoed in Panama's media) equating Panama's civilian public forces (i.e., the Panamanian National Police (PNP) and other civilian security forces) with a military; and
- (c) the appointment on May 13 in an acting capacity of a former military officer and currently uniformed member of the PNP as Director General.

This debate is taking place in the midst of Panama's tumultuous primary election season and as the Torrijos Administration is taking hits for increases in crime and economic uncertainty. First VP and FM Samuel Lewis told Ambassador on May 13 that he was unconcerned by the anti-militarization critique; "People want security. Nobody is really following this militarization debate, except for a few crazies like Bobby Eisenmann," sentiments that were subsequently echoed by Minister of Government and Justice Daniel Delgado. End Summary.

Torrijos' "Secret" Washington Agenda Stirs Speculation

2. (C) Even before Torrijos departed for his May 5-7 visit to Washington, media outlets speculated as to the "real" purpose for Torrijos' visit. Asserting that the U.S.-Panamanian Trade Promotion Agreement (TPA) was unlikely to advance towards U.S. ratification in the coming months, Panamanian media sought to divine the true reason for the trip. One news story, drawing on conversations with ostensible cognoscenti, threw out the following as possible objectives for Torrijos' visit: to re-launch talks to establish a multi-national counternarcotics center; to establish at the former Howard Air Force Base a forward-operating location (FOL) to be ready once the FOL in Manta, Ecuador closed; and to seek radars to help Panama confront the threat posed by

the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in Panama's Darien Province. A last-minute meeting between Torrijos and SECDEF fed the media speculation. The Torrijos Administration's unwillingness to divulge anything more than the fact of a meeting only served to heighten suspicion in the media - a media proud of its role in opposing the military dictatorship.

Gates: A military in every way, if not in name

13. (U) Panama's civilian public forces are "a military in every way, but not in name," Panamanian media widely reported (May 14-23), echoing a story in the U.S. defense trade publication "Inside Defense" that cites a May 6 letter from SECDEF to the House Armed Services Committee. According to the media reporting, SECDEF's letter further described Panama's public forces as functioning in a way consistent with national military forces worldwide. The media also segued seamlessly to quoting a May 8 Pentagon briefing in which SECDEF appeared to compare Panama's public forces to Pakistan's frontier police and noted that Pakistan indeed had an army and was currently ruled by a military dictatorship.

A uniformed man to lead the National Police

14. (C) Torrijos appointed former Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) military officer and currently uniformed Panamanian National Police (PNP) Commissioner (O-6 equivalent) Jaime Ruiz as acting Director General. Ruiz was named Sub-Director in 2007. News reports of Ruiz's appointment almost always mentioned his early training at a military academy in Guatemala, during which time Panama was ruled by a military dictatorship. While it specifies that the head of the PNP must be civilian, some assert that Panamanian law is silent as to whether an "acting" Director General may be a uniformed officer. For example, Patriotic Union (UP) party VP Jose Raul Mulino, who authored constitutional reforms and legislation in the Endara Administration, to disband the PDF and ensure that the PNP would have strong civilian leadership, characterized the Torrijos Administration's sleight of hand as "fully against the spirit and letter of the law." The Torrijos Administration dismissed this assertion, echoed in a number of opinion articles.

A Sampling of Editorial Commentary

15. (SBU) A sampling of editorial commentary taken solely from the print media included the following:

-- "The Americans never felt comfortable about Panama's decision to eliminate the army and the military forces." -- Ebrahim Asvat, Chairman of El Siglo (widely-read daily tabloid newspaper);

-- "Secretary Gates' statements have surprised the gullible and those who lack malice" in Panama. Also, "those who have been observing the military evolution that has gone from simple policemen to soldiers with a military vocation, can see that what (Gates) expressed confirms a return to militarism." The appointment of Jaime Ruiz as head of the PNP "is not an allergic reaction against career soldiers," but against a system that "caused the Republic so much torment, insecurity, and loss of credibility. The Panamanian people are not afraid of career soldiers, they are afraid of the system that leads toward militarization." -- Carlos Ivan Zuniga, attorney and former Rector of the University of Panama, La Prensa opinion article;

-- "...since Secretary Gates is a product of the gringo intelligence sector - yes intelligence! - he needs to be told (as the Democrat congressman did) that Panama, is by decision of all its people and Constitutional mandate - a neutral and

demilitarized country." Also, in criticizing the ruling PRD party, "...the pro-gorilla (gorilla: Panamanian term used for military officers) stance emerges together with the stupid complicity of the gringos who, through US Defense Secretary Robert Gates, confess their participation in the remilitarization with statements that show, to say the least, mental retardation." -- I. Roberto Eisenmann, Jr., former president of La Prensa (widely circulated, pro-business daily), La Prensa opinion article;

-- Torrijos returned to Panama "armed with courage" following his visit to Washington and receiving support from Gates for "Panama's remilitarization." -- Miguel Antonio Bernal, Human Rights activist and attorney, commentary entitled "Martin, the Militarist" in El Panama America (left of center newspaper);

Sentiments similar to those expressed in these print media excerpts were also expressed in radio and television talk shows and other commentary.

Lewis, Delgado Downplay Anti-Militarization Critique

16. (C) "People want security. Nobody is really following this militarization debate, except for a few crazies like Bobby Eisenmann," First VP and FM Samuel Lewis told Ambassador on May 13. Continuing, Lewis downplayed the political impact that the anti-militarization critique of the Torrijos Administration's recent security-related activities.

17. (C) Minister of Government and Justice Daniel Delgado echoed these comments during a recent visit by the Deputy Commander of the US Southern Command. In addition to discussing a number of GOP initiatives that have caused concern about remilitarization, such as the creation of a new Aero-Naval Service and Frontier Police, the restructuring of the PPF and the creation of a new MOGJ Vice Minister for Public Safety, Delgado - a former Major in the PDF himself - addressed the recent remilitarization media criticism. He characterized it as criticism from a small minority, and said that he believed that the majority of Panamanians wanted a more secure country and would trust the government to take the appropriate steps to make it so.

Comment

18. (C) The implied and often stated undercurrent of the anti-militarization camp is that there is a stealth project to remilitarize Panama being carried out by the U.S. and their allies in the PRD. Judging by press reports, SECDEF's comments were made within the context of advocating for Panama's inclusion in the 1206 military assistance program. The nuance that Panama's civilian public forces carried out the duties and responsibilities normally associated with a military and that it was in the U.S. interest to work closely with these civilian authorities was lost on Panamanian observers and commentators. The aforementioned events in both Panama and Washington, upon which opinion leaders have shaped their anti-militarization views, come in the wake of: (a) the creation of a stand-alone Frontier Police; (b) the possible fusion of the National Maritime Service (SMN) and the National Air Service (SAN) into a new Aero-Naval Service; and (c) the disbandment of the Technical Judicial Police (PTJ) and the move of its personnel and functions to the new Judicial Investigative Directorate (DIJ) under the Minister of Government and Justice. The appointment of a uniformed person to head the PNP only adds to some Panamanians' belief that dark forces are striving to re-store Panama's much maligned military. The legality of naming an "acting" head of the PNP is unlikely to be pursued (successfully) in court. The PRD - the party of Omar Torrijos (the current president's father) and Manuel Noriega - is grappling with primary campaign concerns about economic stability and

increased crime. Furthermore, growing national concern about rising crime -- the third most significant issue cited in recent polling -- may blunt objections about having Ruiz at the helm of the PNP as long as he is "tough on crime." Indeed, in one recent poll, 16 percent of respondents indicated that they knew of a family member who had been the victim of a robbery or an assault. Going forward, the USG will need to consider this anti-militarization phenomenon as it seeks to advance its security engagement with Panama. End Comment.
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